

Dreams of Old Places

A Personal Essay

by Anthony Bukoski



St. Adalbert's School, 1916.

Wisconsin Highways 2 and 53 converge in the uplands east of Superior. From here, you see Duluth climb a hillside of 1.1-billion-year-old rock that geologists call “the Duluth Gabbro Complex.” Nearer still, Superior, Wisconsin, my hometown, sprawls back from Lake Superior, the Great Sweetwater Sea, as though, like the author of this reminiscence, unsure of who it is. With the way things are going in Superior, who wouldn't be confused? Churches have closed, destroying ethnic parishes. The makeup of old neighborhoods has changed. Long-established businesses have shut down.

Moreover, we cannot shake the reputation of having the highest rate of alcohol consumption *per capita* in the country. According to a story in the *Duluth News Tribune*, we also have “the oldest housing stock in the state . . . 11th oldest in the nation. About 54 percent of homes in the city were built before 1940. . . . Before 1995, Superior didn't have an inspector assigned to enforce more than 60 ordinances related to housing, health, zoning and property maintenance.” During some months, we receive 14 percent of the available sunlight.

Adding to our woes, Central High School, where President Calvin Coolidge had his Summer White House in 1928, will soon be razed. Atop a column on the school's front lawn, which faces one of Superior's busiest streets, a bust of railway builder James J. Hill had stood for 77 years. Whether he was a great man or a scoundrel, what has happened to him is a shame. His statue now graces the side entrance of the Burlington-Northern Santa Fe Railroad's yard office south of Tower Avenue. Where before he had a school rising behind him on whose summer lawns a laconic New Hampshire fisherman once practiced fly casting, now, for a backdrop, “The Empire Builder” has a railroad yard through which trains haul

low-sulphur coal to the waterfront. The statue has suffered another indignity: Someone has gouged out the commemorative plaque.

Regarding change, now the railroad has mechanized operations. When you cross tracks in certain parts of Superior, signs warn:

ATTENTION

Remote control locomotives operate in this area.
Locomotive cabs may be unoccupied.

Ore docks have been torn down. The King Midas Flour Mill long ago stopped milling wheat. Barko Hydraulics has laid off workers. Last year, a major employer, a food distributorship, went out of business. Were it not for the oil refinery, the state college, the shipyard, coal and grain docks, and what remains of the railroad, we would have lost our economic lifeblood.

Superior's character evolved over a century and a half when places in our community—say, the Summer White House at Central High School; ethnic churches such as St. Adalbert, St. Stanislaus, or SS. Cyril and Methodius; or businesses such as Tony's Cabaret on North Third Street, Roth's Department Store on Tower Avenue, or the East End Drugstore in my neighborhood—were imbued with meaning by people walking or driving past them, working or praying in them, patronizing them, celebrating in them. Now, in place of the Summer White House, we will probably have a convenience store and gas station or a Cash 'n Go check-cashing business. Anything to speed up life. Already, in place of the ethnic churches (St. Louis and St. Patrick have also closed), we have what I call “hub churches” spread about Superior at convenient “hub” locations. (From nine Catholic churches, we are down to three plus the Cathedral of Christ the King.) Now, in place of businesses I remember from youth—the East End Drugstore,

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Kresge's, Woolworth's, the Palace and Beacon Theaters (the latter advertising itself as "home-owned")—we have what most cities have: A multiplex cinema, a Wal-Mart, Kmart, Target.

Curiously, water almost saved us. Had it kept us from development, we would have remained run-down and economically depressed; to my way of thinking, however, we would be less depressed in another way for having escaped the onslaught of warehouse-style stores, "big-box" retailers, that makes a part of Superior, population 27,368, look like every other small city in America.

My hometown has as much land within its boundaries—45 square miles—as Milwaukee. We are built on low, flat, wet clay soil. The clay, the wetlands, contains water so ancient it is almost holy. Water neither drains from the flat surface nor seeps through the clay. A biologist, aptly named Mr. Reed, who had traveled here from Madison to write "a management plan that protects the best of Superior's wetlands yet leaves room for development," told the *Duluth News Tribune* that "[s]ome of the water down in this soil moves so slow [sic], it could be 8,000 years old—give or take a week."

The importance of wetlands in supporting plant, bird, and animal life and in purifying water had grown increasingly evident when Wal-Mart planned to build here around the time Mr. Reed came north. Meeting resistance from the Department of Natural Resources, from citizens interested in protecting the natural landscape, and from others desirous of keeping Superior from becoming Eau Claire or Racine, Wal-Mart nearly withdrew from negotiating for land until political and business interests proposed a wetlands-mitigation program wherein county land out by Ray's EZ Bar east of here would be designated as wetlands in exchange for the meadows Wal-Mart wanted in town. Now, in a corridor along Tower Avenue, we have the aforementioned stores plus a Menards—even, for a short while, an Office Depot, which, when it closed, left a parking lot and a large, white, ugly box store standing vacant until, last year, a Dollar Days store opened in the space.

We are so awash in change that I am unsure where I am. Is this Beloit? Kenosha? At Wal-Mart—one of two stores that sell typewriter ribbons; I go there if Tri-State Business Systems has closed for the day or the weekend—I see shoppers zip hap-

pily about. In 15 years, I have entered Superior's Kmart eight times, six of those not to buy anything in the store that made "the Blue Light Special" famous, but to check my blood pressure, which is high partly because of the way things are going here. Twice, I have been in Target. I eschew malls altogether. Good Superiorites, the Wal-Mart, Kmart, and Target shoppers appear content. Still, in their introspective moments, they must hunger for something more meaningful than a trip to these stores or to the Mariner Mall, hunger for a neighborhood of old monuments. I long for this neighborhood. Knowing it makes me unsure, in days of remote-controlled locomotives, plant closings, and big-box stores, of what town I've lived in all these years.

When asked years ago where a person was from in Superior, he responded, not without pride, "Itasca," "Allouez," "Billings Park," "South Superior." If you lived by the cement plant and old gasworks on the waterfront, you were from the "Gas Plant" neighborhood. A little north or east of there, you lived in the "North End"; possibly your father worked in the shipyards, at the grain elevators, or as a longshoreman on the waterfront. Ethnic enclaves and churches for Belgians, for French and Indians, for Slovaks, for Poles: these, together with geographical and industrial features, distinguished neighborhoods.

Born a loyal son of Superior nearly 60 years ago, I have spent most of my life in the East End. So, too, did my Polish émigré grandparents. Even late in his working life, my father, Joe Bukoski, left our Fourth Street house, lunch bucket in hand, to follow the railroad tracks as they curve beneath the Second Street viaduct, pass by a corner of Hog Island Inlet, the most polluted inlet on Lake Superior, then run by the oil dock on their way to King Midas. If his emphysema wasn't troubling him, he could get to work at the mill in 20 minutes. Other days, Tony Stromko, his cousin and fellow millhand, drove him. During an afternoon shift, they could almost have walked to Confession at St. Adalbert's and back during coffee break. As Poles, Belgians, Norwegians, Swedes, and Finns came to work on the ore dock and at the flour mill, butchers, bartenders, cobblers, and bakers busied themselves in the stores of East End. Though part of the King Midas Flour Mill was demolished during the years my father worked there, he could daydream over photos of how it once looked. Daydream, reminisce. Similarly, after the Northern Pacific Ore Dock was abandoned, part of it torn down, Steve Katzmark, whose family lived directly below the dock and who had labored up there all his life, could be seen wandering 100 feet in the air as if he, like my father, had nowhere to go but his dreams.

More recently, I have observed the look of disorientation that inevitably leads to dreams of old places: Delinquents have set fire to Jim Palmer's East End barbershop, in his family since 1937; Cy Gray's bank has forsaken the corner it occupied since 1897 to open a drive-through facility a half-mile away; the theater marquee, another East End landmark, was taken down three years ago from the movie house that closed showing *The Bramble Bush* four decades before.

Something else is occurring. Down Fifth Street, seven blocks from our church and school, Szkoła Wojciecha (once the spiritual, educational, and social locus of a Polish neighborhood), stood Stasiak's store. Nearer to St. Adalbert's in the two-block-long business district were Kiszewski's store, Stanski's market, Nadolski's and Stranko's taverns, Pesark's bakery, the bank, the movie theater, other businesses. All but the taverns, no longer



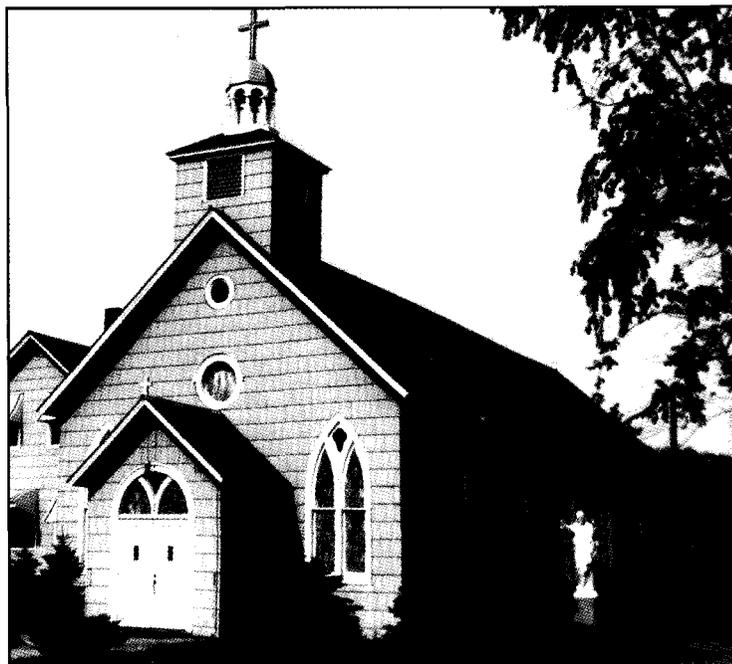
The King Midas Flour Mills, Superior, Wisconsin.

owned by Poles, are closed. The East End Drugstore, built by Floyd Priest in 1898, has remained open longer than any business, longer than any church except St. Francis Xavier, a hub church. Purchased by Art Haugen, son of Norwegian immigrants, when Floyd Priest died in 1933, the drugstore has held the neighborhood together these last years. To borrow a term from “mall-speak,” it was an “anchor store” in a neighborhood where the old Polish people have died and the young, moved away.

Now it is time for Art Haugen, Jr.’s disorientation. In the family for 71 years, the drugstore, unable to compete with the box-store pharmacies, will close once souvenir and curiosity seekers buy the remaining liniments, horehound drops, udder balm, deodorants, Mollimentum-Brand hoof dressing, postcards, Acme Lime Sulfur, to which you add water then dip chickens in the mixture to rid them of parasites, and other items that indicate how long the store has been here.

In a humble gesture to do an honorable deed the way the family always has done honorable deeds for the East End, Art Haugen, Jr., has wrapped, somewhat clumsily, a blue tarpaulin over the word “DRUG” on the neon sign outside. For the first time, the sign reads “EAST END STORE.” When I visit him—he is nearing 60, too—we sit in shadows. If nobody stops by for lime sulfur or a postcard, then it makes a long day for him. He has had to let employees go from a store his father still came to in his 90’s.

The last time I left the East End Drugstore, Art Jr. said, “Wait!” Disappearing into deeper shadows, he called, “I have something for you.” Reemerging from the back, he held in his hand the only thing I guess I could have wanted at that moment in life: From the plastic pikestaff Art Jr. handed me hung a miniature Polish flag. “Thank you,” I said, wondering where it had come from. Alone in the car, I touched the red and white flag to my heart.



St. Adalbert's Church, which no longer stands.

This last shock, the news of the closing of the East End Drugstore, has torn the life out of Art Haugen, Jr., out of everyone who loves the neighborhood and dislikes what America is becoming under the direction of the Sam Waltons with their Supercenters. Thankfully, as a dreamer like my father and Mr. Katzmark, I find consolation knowing the land will remember all this, that the 8,000-year-old water will remember.

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The Quickening by Andrew Huntley

“Speed Kills”
— Roadsign

“Can you walk with the oak’s root?” Ezra Pound,
Magus of the moderns, turned on his age—
Bearing an old man’s shame, a poet’s rage
From wrong to wrong. *Il miglior fabbro* found
Not beauty in his madness . . . small good ground:
Errors and wrecks—sad failure. From that cage
At Pisa, from that hospital, our mage
Went penitent by rushlight, self-discrowned.
Maybe he reached the splendour; but the world
His sovereign utterance set off on earth,
Shocking all artistry within the pale,
Spell-bound the city to mad fragments—whirled—
Deformed—apostate: readied for the birth
Of him whose coming just the fooled shall hail.